Pigs and Cows: Peace walls and sectarianism in Northern Ireland

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Abstract:
Northern Ireland has a long history of sectarian strife between its Catholic and Protestant communities, culminating with the Troubles, the decades long conflict between British state forces and unionist and nationalist paramilitary groups which raged from the 1960s to 1990s. Despite the end of open conflict, Northern Ireland has remained bitterly divided along sectarian lines. This remains true today, almost 20 years since the cessation of hostilities. This paper looks at sectarianism in Belfast, notably through the "peace walls" dividing Protestant and Catholic neighbourhoods, and how they function as *de facto* borders as well as other manifestations of sectarianism, such as social interactions and electoral behaviour.

Résumé :
L'Irlande du Nord a une longue histoire de lutte sectaire entre les communautés catholiques et protestantes, culminant dans les Troubles, le conflit qui a duré plusieurs décennies entre les forces de l'état et les groupes unionistes et nationalistes paramilitaires. Malgré la fin du conflit ouvert dans les 1990s, l'Irlande du Nord reste profondément divisée selon des lignes sectaires. Ceci est vrai aujourd'hui, presque vingt ans après la fin des hostilités. Cet article examine le sectarisme à Belfast, notamment en analysant les « murs de paix » divisant les quartiers protestants et catholiques, et comment ils fonctionnent de facto comme des frontières, ainsi que d'autres manifestations du sectarisme, comme les interactions sociales et le comportement électoral.

"Are you a Pig or a Cow?" While this question would be seen as odd by any foreigner, it is an important question for children in Northern Ireland. Far from being part of a child's game or joke, it is a manifestation of one of Northern Ireland's fundamental characteristics: the sectarian divide between Protestants and Catholics. Indeed, by asking this question, children are able to identify whether or not someone is part of their religious group. If one answers "Pig," then they are Protestant, and if they answer "Cow," then they are Catholic. While there are other variations of the same question, its widespread use among children, shows to which extent Northern Ireland, although now free of the sectarian paramilitary terrorism that had plagued it from the late 1960s to the 1990s, remains a deeply divided society.[1] The most visually striking manifestations of this ongoing sectarianism are the "peace walls" (see Appendix I), erected between Protestant and Catholic neighbourhoods in various cities of Northern Ireland, but especially in Belfast, on which this text will be focused. This text aims to determine whether or not these peace walls have led to decreased sectarianism in Belfast. It argues that, with the peace walls still serving as borders between Protestants and Catholics, they have not contributed to making Northern Ireland less sectarian. This will be demonstrated by first defining the key terms that will be used throughout this paper, notably the notion of "sectarianism," along with a brief explanation of what defines the two opposing communities in Northern Ireland. Then, this text will look at the historical roots of sectarianism in Northern Ireland. Afterwards, it will discuss the role that the peace walls of Belfast play in the city's sectarianism, looking at their practical and intellectual consequences. Then, the political situation of Northern Ireland will be briefly discussed. However, before entering this discussion, it would be useful to define a few terms and analyze of the relevant history of Northern Ireland. Before getting into a

[1] Donna M. Lanclos, *At Play in Belfast: Children's Folklore and Identities in Northern Ireland* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 124-144.

discussion on sectarianism, defining it briefly will ensure the clarity of the argument. According to Liechty and Clegg, it is

> a system of attitudes, actions, beliefs, and structures [...] which arises as a distorted expression of positive, human needs especially for belonging, identity, and the free expression of difference [...] and is expressed in destructive patterns of relating.[2]

Thus, we see how sectarianism is first and foremost based on the idea of belonging to a group, either through common beliefs or kinship; this group becomes the "us." It is when this "us" group is opposed to an "other" group, through conflicting interests and desires, that sectarianism arises. This definition and general concept of sectarianism will be useful to keep in mind throughout the text, as it will highlight the extent to which the idea of otherness, one that will be touched upon later and plays a big role in this conflict.

Despite the common use of the terms "Catholics" and "Protestants" to designate the two main groups in Northern Ireland, to describe the conflict as a religious one would be misleading. The conflict is first and foremost a political one, regarding Northern Ireland's status within the United Kingdom. While the mostly Protestant "unionists"[3] want to stay within the UK, the mostly Catholic "nationalists"[4] want Northern Ireland to be part of a united Irish republic. There is, however, another layer to this division, as unionists and nationalists tend to have different ethnic origins. Unionists are usually Ulster Scots— Scots who migrated to (Northern) Ireland when it was under British rule— while nationalists are usually of Irish origin.[5] Keeping all of this in mind, this text will be using the terms "Catholic" and "Protestant" to refer to the groups in general, using the terms "nationalist"

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[2] Joseph Liechty and Cecelia Clegg, *Moving beyond Sectarianism: Religion, Conflict, and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland* (The Columba Press: Dublin, 2001), 102-103.
[3] Some unionists refer to themselves as "loyalists", as they consider themselves to be loyal to the British Crown.
[4] Some nationalists are referred to and identify themselves as "republicans", as their objective is to reunite Northern Ireland with Ireland.
[5] Michael Hughes, *Ireland Divided: The Roots of the Modern Irish Problem* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 1-3.

and "unionist" when referring to political ideas and allegiances. Having defined the relevant terms, an overview of the relevant history of Ireland will help to better understand the issues at hand.

The island of Ireland has a long history of being invaded. After having fought the Normans and then the English, all of Ireland was subjugated to English rule by the beginning of the 17th century, which was cemented with the 1800 Acts of Union, uniting the Crowns of Great Britain and Ireland that had previously been in personal union. Under British rule, Ireland would become a blueprint for future colonial policies, expropriating Catholic landowners in the north-east to put in place plantations where Protestant-Scottish settlers could cultivate the land, in the hopes of one day "civiliz[ing] the wild and dangerous native Irish."[6] This dream ultimately failed, as only the north-east, namely the province of Ulster, gained a majority of Protestant Scots, from which they developed their new name of "Ulster Scots." It is therefore hardly surprising that Ireland was partitioned in the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1922, which put an end to the Irish War of Independence of 1919-1921. While 26 of the 32 counties of Ireland were allowed to form the Irish Free State, a Dominion of the British Empire,[7] the six northeastern counties became Northern Ireland.[8]

With partition, came the creation of the Parliament of Northern Ireland, to which Westminster delegated powers over the everyday affairs of the region. This new administration, led by the Ulster Unionist Party, which had close ties to the Orange Order,[9] systemically discriminated against Catholics, making use of employment discrimination in

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[6] Ibid., 2.
[7] Ireland then became completely independent in 1937, when it changed its Constitution, becoming the republic that it is today.
[8] Hughes, *Ireland Divided: The Roots of the Modern Irish Problem*, 6-57.
[9] International Protestant organisation currently or formerly active throughout the Commonwealth of Nations. It remains particularly important within the unionist movement in Northern Ireland, where it holds a strong anti-Catholic stance.

the public sector, and some areas of the private sector, along with provocation of Catholics with Orange Order parades going through their neighbourhoods, commemorating important Protestant victories over the Catholics.[10] This dominance was assured with the use of gerrymandering. The case of Derry/Londonderry[11] illustrates this, as "a unionist majority was returned at local elections despite a large Catholic majority population. This was because electoral boundaries were drawn in such a way as to return a majority of unionists."[12]

In the 1960s arose a desire for change among the Catholics, leading to the creation of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association in 1967, which held peaceful marches and protests, asking for equality between Catholics and Protestants. Despite the peaceful nature of these protests, there were many clashes between the protesters and the Royal Ulster Constabulary, the largely Protestant police force of Northern Ireland. One such example was of a protest over the eviction of a Catholic family from council housing[13] in Derry/Londonderry: "Despite the march being banned, marchers went ahead and were attacked by the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), leading to violence between nationalists and the RUC in the Bogside."[14] These events eventually led to attacks on protesters by unionist mobs, sparking riots all over Northern Ireland. "Sectarian violence escalated throughout the summer of 1969. Much of the violence was perpetrated by loyalists following the creation of the new Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) in 1966. Loyalist rioting

[10] Jon Calame and Esther Charlesworth, *Divided Cities: Belfast, Beirut, Jerusalem, Mostar, and Nicosia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvannia Press, 2009), 68-70.
[11] The name of this municipality is a contentious issue, with nationalists calling it "Derry", while unionists refer to it as "Londonderry".
[12] Joanne McEvoy, *The politics of Northern Ireland* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 30.
[13] Given the gerrymandering, these councils tended to be dominated by unionists.
[14] Ibid., 34.

took place in parts of Belfast and Catholic families were burned out of their homes."[15] This was the beginning of a period of Northern Irish history known as "the Troubles." It was around this time that peace walls started being constructed, aiming to stop sectarian violence. By August, having largely lost control of the situation, the unionist government asked Westminster to send in the army in order to put an end to the violence. While at first Catholics welcomed the soldiers' presence, believing they would be protected from unionist attacks, this perception shifted quickly with the establishment of curfews, and the practice of internment of those suspected of being with the Provisional Irish Republic Army (IRA).[16] On Sunday January 30, 1972, the killing of unarmed protesters by British forces — a day which would become known as "Bloody Sunday" — led to heightened paramilitary activity by radical nationalist and unionist groups, taking part in various terrorist acts. While various parties tried to reach an agreement in 1974 with the Sunningdale Agreement, hardline unionists and nationalists disagreed with the deal, leading to its failure and continued paramilitary activity. In 1981, a hunger strike by nationalist prisoners led to the rise of the hardline republican party *Sinn Féin* ("We ourselves") as a mainstream political party, despite its links to the IRA.[17]

The first steps towards peace came in 1985 with the Anglo-Irish Agreement between Ireland and the UK, recognising Ireland within an advisory role in Northern Ireland's government, and that Northern Ireland could only join Ireland through democratic means. The Good Friday Agreement of 1998[18] between most parties in Northern Ireland, along with the UK and Ireland, led to the creation of the Northern Ireland Assembly, with shared

[15] Ibid., 36.
[16] Republican paramilitary organisation whose goal was to unite Ireland through violent means.
[17] Jon Calame and Esther Charlesworth, *op. cit*., 70-73.
[18] Also known as the "Belfast Agreement".

power between unionists and nationalists, and the recognition of Northern Ireland's right to self-determination. This development led to the disarmament of all major paramilitary organisations, most notably, of the IRA. Despite all this, the Assembly was suspended in 2002, as there were rumours of a republican spy ring in the Assembly.[19] There was also trouble linked to power sharing, as the IRA were slow to disarm, along with the more hardline Democratic Unionist Party replacing the Ulster Unionist Party as the main unionist party. The DUP was unwilling to work with Sinn Féin, thus rendering impossible the formation of a government.[20] Only with the intervention of the Irish and British governments did the parties finally agree to work together, with the introduction of the St. Andrews Agreement of 2006, which made some amendments to the Good Friday Agreement.[21] Since 2007, the Assembly has resumed, with power being shared between unionists and nationalists.[22]

Despite the successes of the peace process in establishing shared governance and putting an end to paramilitary violence, Northern Ireland remains fundamentally divided between its Catholic and Protestant communities and while the Troubles are in the past, the current sectarianism in Northern Ireland is undeniable. The peace walls offer the clearest example of this ongoing sectarianism. Made up of brick or concrete and topped with steel panels and steel wire fencing, they might remind some of the Berlin Wall, but there exists a fundamental difference; while the Berlin Wall was erected to divide a people against their will between two different political entities, the Northern Irish peace walls were erected to physically divide different peoples from one another. Another important difference is that

[19] Joanne McEvoy, *op.cit.*, 160.
[20] Ibid., 160-162.
[21] Ibid., 166-169.
[22] Jon Calame and Esther Charlesworth, *op. cit.*, 73-74.

while it was extremely difficult and dangerous for one to go from one side of the Berlin Wall to the other, the same cannot be said for Belfast's peace walls, as there are gates, operated by local police or community groups, through which one can go at certain hours of the day, and one can also go around the walls, as some of them are not particularly long. Despite this, most residents of Belfast have learned to stay away from neighbourhoods that are not "theirs," highlighting that these walls are, in fact, borders. To show how peace walls contribute to sectarianism, an explanation will be made as to how they qualify as borders, and how these various characteristics contribute to sectarianism in Belfast.

John Agnew, quoting Peter Sahlins, explains that states, along with the national identities that help legitimise them, are not simply created from the political centres outwards, but rather partially created at the border itself, with border communities establishing what qualifies as "other."[23] At best, those living on the other side of the border are seen as foreigners, at worst, they are seen as enemies. While there may have already been actions that determined the identities on either sides of this border, it is there that the feeling of "otherness" is fully experienced, as borders are also perceived as the state's bastions against foreign invasions.[24] Parker *et al*., citing Jacques Derrida, argue that there is a certain metaphysical quality to the border, with its "juxtaposing of binary oppositions,"[25] notably that of "us" and "them."[26] As one Belfast resident put it, "The walls [...] are only the most visible manifestation of 'the walls within people's minds.'[27]" While this border

[23] John Agnew, "Borders on the Mind: Re-framing Border Thinking," *Ethics and Global Politics* 1(2008): 177-180.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Noel Parker *et al*., "Lines in the Sand? Towards an Agenda for Critical Border Studies," *Geopolitics* 14(2009): 584.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Sean O'Hagan, "Belfast, divided in the name of peace," *The Guardian*, January 22, 2012, http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2012/jan/22/peace-walls-troubles-belfast-feature (accessed November 8, 2015).

logic is usually attributed to borders between states, it also applies to the peace walls in Belfast, as emphasized by this resident's statement, but also more generally by the prevailing attitude in Belfast, where deep sectarian attitudes have been engrained in most inhabitants. Because of this sectarian attitude, people tend to fraternise with their own and to not venture too far from their neighbourhoods. By staying within their own neighbourhoods, members of both communities are unable to interact with the "other", leading to a perpetuation of prejudices. This has also led Catholics, despite their growing population, to stay within Catholic neighbourhoods. So ingrained is this sectarian attitude that children interiorise it, seeing it as an aspect of their lives, as exemplified by the question of "Are you a Pig or a Cow?"[28] In Lanclos' *At Play in Belfast: Children's Folklore and Identities in Northern Ireland*, a child called Timothy speaks of his experiences, saying,

> Well, see, where I live, there's this street, and see up here [indicates with his hands] where I live it's Catholics, and then you go down and there's a dotted yellow line, and then down there [indicates different area] it's Protestants. And there's one shop here, and another shop there, and I wouldn't go to the shop there [in the Protestant part].[29]

That a child would understand space as being divided between Protestants and Catholics, and would feel an aversion to going into a Protestant area out of concern for his own safety shows that sectarian divides are part of the fundamental understanding of space in Belfast. Much more than the simple knowledge that a neighbourhood is safe or not, this passage demonstrates the child's feeling that those on the other side would want to do him harm for simply being Catholic.

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[28] Lanclos, *At Play in Belfast*,126.
[29] Ibid., 128.

Vaughan-Williams, citing Derrida, explains that borders can be seen as visual scars of past conflicts, which determined where those borders came to be.[30] Sometimes, like in the case of Belfast, that violent past is not so distant, especially when one considers the various pro-paramilitary murals that can be found all over the city and that the walls themselves were erected at the request of communities, who saw them as a way to ensure their safety from the "other." There is therefore a fear of being unsafe that is associated with leaving one's community. Another part of Timothy's interview sheds some light on this. He refers to an event during which he was standing at the line between the Catholic and Protestant areas, and was asked the "Pig or Cow" question by an older child. "I saw him walking up from there [Protestant area] so I knew. I said it didn't matter what I was, but he said go on give us an answer, so I said 'A Cow' and he said, 'I'm gonna beat you up you Fenian.[31,32]" Such threats from a child to another, based solely on one's origins speak volumes of the society in which these two boys grew up, a society that, despite being officially at peace, is still plagued by sectarianism.

Another manifestation of the continued sectarianism in Belfast, and Northern Ireland in general, is its electoral behaviour. As it has been argued previously, Northern Ireland remains deeply divided, which is in part shown by the Alliance Party's poor showings in Assembly elections. This party, created as an anti-sectarian party, while attempting to bridge the gap between all residents of Northern Ireland, continues to have unsatisfactory results in elections since the first Assembly election in 1998, always finishing in fifth place behind the two dominant unionist and two dominant nationalist parties. It currently holds

[30] Nick Vaughan-Williams, "Borders, Territory, Law," *International Political Sociology* 2(2008): 328.
[31] Derogatory term used towards Irish Catholics, referring to the Fenian Brotherhood, a group of Irish rebels during the XIXth century.
[32] Lanclos, p.128.

only eight out of 108 seats.[33] As for the Belfast seats, it holds only three out of twenty-four.[34] As for Belfast's City council, it holds only eight out of a total of sixty seats.[35] The Alliance Party's results can be explained by "the nature of the 'dual party system,' where there is competition *between* as well as *within* the ethnic segments of society. This competition, therefore, leaves little room for a centre ground, bi-communal party to progress."[36] As Tonge argues, "[f]rom its inception the Alliance Party attempted to operate as a biconfessional party in a confessional party system."[37]

The failure of anti-sectarian politics in Northern Ireland is further accentuated by the fact that the two leading parties are the Democratic Unionist Party and *Sinn Féin*, both being the most hardline party of their community, especially when compared to the nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party and the Ulster Unionist Party.[38] While the DUP has softened some of its positions and is no longer the same party which once opposed the Good Friday Agreement, it remains a staunchly unionist party, whose links to the Orange Order and the Free Presbyterian Church remain strong.[39] As for *Sinn Féin*, while it is no longer the parliamentary wing of the IRA, it remains unequivocal in its goal to one day reunite the island.[40] Therefore, the cooperation of these two parties should not be seen as anything more than what both must perceive as a necessary evil, as preferable to the

[33] North Ireland Assembly. "Statistics," http://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/mlas/statistics.aspx (accessed November 8, 2015).
[34] Ibid.
[35] Belfast City Council. "Your councillors," https://minutes3.belfastcity.gov.uk/mgMemberIndex.aspx?bcr=1 (accessed November 8, 2015).
[36] Joanne McEvoy, *op.cit.*, 61.
[37] Jonathan Tonge, *The new Northern Irish politics?* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 89.
[38] North Ireland Assembly. "Statistics".
[39] Jonathan Tonge, *op. cit.*, 80-81.
[40] Ibid., 121-122.

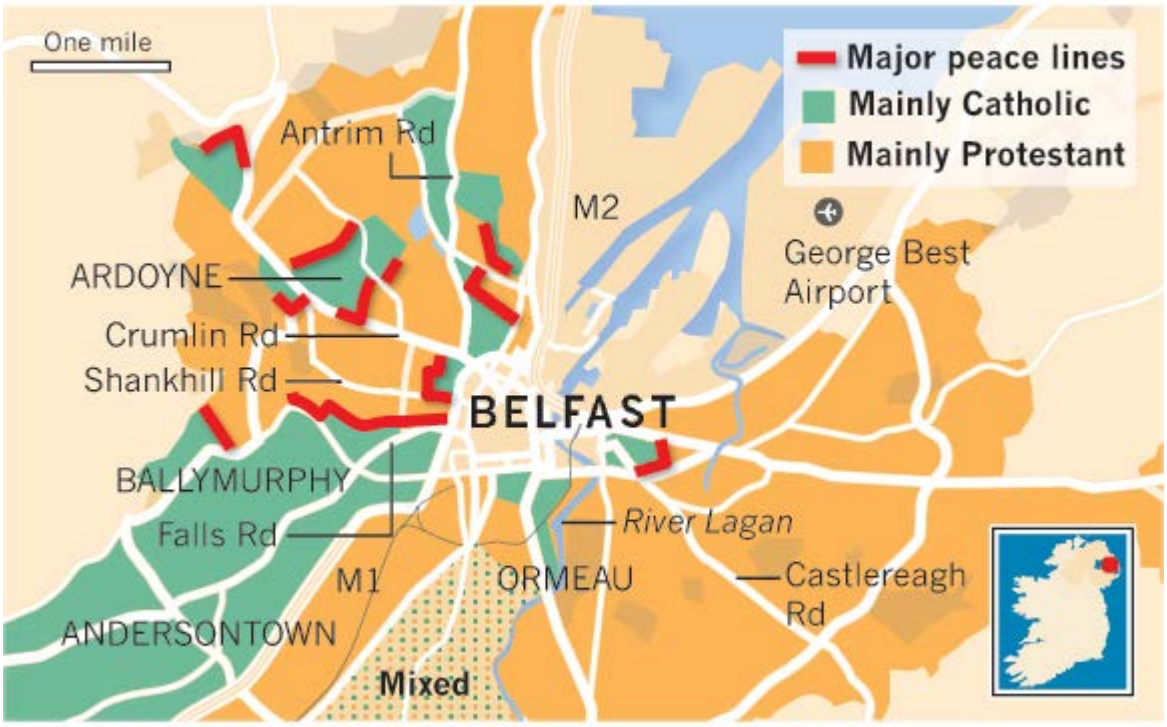
decades of violence they have gone through. Their cooperation in government remains uneasy, a manifestation of the continued sectarianism in Northern Ireland.

As it has been demonstrated in this text, the peace walls set up in Belfast to stop sectarianism have in no way decreased it, despite the end of paramilitary violence. This is illustrated by the role that these walls continue to play as borders. They continue to contribute to a dynamic of "us" and "them" between Catholics and Protestants by isolating each community, leading to the perpetuation of stereotypes and prejudices between both groups. It has also led to sustained sectarianism by reinforcing the perception that one can only be safe within his own walls. Furthermore, the failure of the Alliance Party to garner widespread support is another important consideration. With the First Minister and Deputy First Minister's announcement in 2013 that they wanted to see the walls torn down by 2023,[41] one must ask what steps will be taken to combat sectarianism and how the government will ensure that Northern Ireland does not return to what it was before the Belfast Agreement. Further studies could observe how well the integrated school system has done, along with how this sectarianism affects immigrants.

[41] Gerry Moriarty, "Robinson and McGuinness want 'peace walls' down within 10 years", *The Irish Times*, May 10 2013, http://www.irishtimes.com/news/robinson-and-mcguinness-want-peace-walls-down-within-10-years-1.1388183 (accessed November 8, 2015).

Appendix I

Map of Belfast showing peace walls, along with Catholic and Protestant neighbourhoods.



Source: http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/wpcontent/uploads/2011/05/183_feature_mckittrick_map.jpg

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